The Cut of His Jib

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The Cut of His Jib

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Summary

Along the treacherous route to a job, Vax (1) does not stab Percy for flirting with his sister (2) successfully stabs a pirate (3) learns something about their gunslinger that fundamentally changes his opinion of the man.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The cut of his jib: nautical idiom meaning the way one looks or conducts themselves.

Vax expected that sooner or later he'd learn about Percy's Tragic Past. There was just too much going on there for *something* not to slip. He did not, however, expect *sailing* to be part of that backstory. As with every misadventure, it started with a mistake. Namely, splitting the party like fucking amateurs who'd never gone adventuring before instead of the seasoned professionals they liked to pretend they were.

Investigating the history of a noble's soon-to-be son-in-law was a bit different from their usual gig, but it paid well and they didn't have anything else lined up. Pike, Scanlan, Grog, and Keyleth were going to do some questioning in the seedier parts of town, while Vex, Percy, and (with great protestation) Vax were going to the magistrate's ball to investigate the upper crust. A ball on a private pleasure island, because apparently rich people were too good to even share the same fucking *continent* as the rest of the plebes.

It made sense for Percy to be on the classy team - he was properly noble and had the stick up his ass to prove it. Vex and Vax were noble too, technically, albeit noble bastards. Not that anyone in Frytas would know the difference. His sister enjoyed dressing up and proving to strangers that she was better than everyone else, so she was happy to go. Conversely, Vax wanted absolutely nothing to do with any of it - there were *reasons* he escaped Sygorn. He was good at slinking around the shadows, both literally and metaphorically, and he enjoyed it. The Clasp brand on his back wasn't there just for kicks and giggles. He was an obvious shoo-in for the criminal underbelly team. So obviously, Vax was stuck in the middle of the ocean listening to his sister flirt at Percy and Percy flirt at his sister and watching them both being completely oblivious to what the other was doing. Meanwhile, Keyleth, *an actual gods-blessed princess*, was going to see her first real live fighting ring and drink fireball shots and go sneaking about as a squirrel or whatever.

(Vax had wanted to take Keyleth to her first fighting ring. He had it all planned out. Reputable-ish place, for a given value of the term, decent drinks, seats with a good view, maybe a staged fight so he could show off some of his better moves without Keyleth being distracted by having to fight herself… It wasn't a date. Really. Just a chance to spend time with her. Alone. Without everyone else making it weird with innuendos. They were friends. Just friends. He just wanted an opportunity to be *better* friends. That's all. Really.)

(He was a terrible liar, especially when he was lying to himself.)

"It's only for a few days," Vex said as they boarded the rented boat. It was just large enough for themselves, a handful of other passengers, and a small crew. "For once, no one and nothing is trying to kill us. The weather is perfect. Try and enjoy yourself!"

For the record, Vax emphatically did *not* enjoy spewing everything he'd eaten for the last month over the rails. Especially since Percy, of all people, seemed completely unaffected, strolling about the deck with all the ease of a lord surveying his grounds.

Eventually, Vax gave up on dry heaving and stumbled over to where the gunslinger was inspecting the… there was probably a fancy name for it, but it just looked like a pole with a bunch of ropes to Vax. Percy probably knew. The nerd knew all sorts of random technical terminology like that.

“Feeling better?” Percy asked pleasantly. He was worse than Keyleth the morning after a drinking binge, all cheery while the others suffered through their hangovers. Rank bastard.

“I’ll feel better once we’re back on solid ground.”

“You’ll still feel the swaying for a while afterward, fair warning,” Percy smirked. As peeved as Vax was with the entire situation, he couldn’t help but notice how *relaxed* Percy seemed. He’d taken off his ubiquitous coat and rolled his shirtsleeves up to his elbows, for one thing. And he was smiling without provocation, for another.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Oh?”

“You seem… happy?”

“Is that a crime?” Percy raised an eyebrow. “I admit, I’ve missed this. This craft is a bit smaller than I’m used to, but the smell of brine, the wind, the sun… it’s all the same.”

“I take it you’ve been on a boat before.”

“I spent some time sailing along the Lucidian Coast.”

Huh. Vax hadn’t expected that.

Percy must have noticed the flabbergasted look on his face, and uncharacteristically expounded upon his past. Unprompted even. Vax suppressed the urge to check to see if the moons had fallen out of the sky or something equally improbable had happened to spawn such a miracle. De Rolo was more tight-lipped than a abbess around Scanlan when it came to anything that happened prior to Stilben. “They paid well for my skill with tinkering and trigonometry.”

“Tinkering, I get, but what on earth does trigonometry have to do with anything?”

“How else are you supposed to know where you are? There are no landmarks at sea,” Percy waved around them. Vax could just barely make out the shoreline they’d left behind. Everywhere else was uniform blue sky or uniform blue water. It was unnatural, was what it was. He’d never been anywhere so devoid of variety. Vax missed some good shadows. He felt too exposed as it was. It made the back of his neck itch like they were about to be ambushed.

“Still not seeing what pretentious arithmetic has to do with it, Freddie.”

“Here, I’ll show you,” Percy all but dragged him towards the back of the boat. Another oddity. De Rolo wasn’t exactly the most tactile person in their party. More often than not, his

personal bubble felt more like a personal fortified fortress, complete with crocodiles in the moat and trebuchets on the ramparts. And yet, his hand was on Vax's forearm. Unprompted. Who was this stranger and what had he done with their prickly human?

Perhaps the endless rocking waves were shaking Percy's brain as badly as they were shaking Vax's stomach. That would explain a lot.

Percy started an enthusiastic conversation with the captain (judging by his fancy hat) that contained more jargon than thieves' cant. At the end of it, he'd gained some sort of complicated metal contraption with too many moving pieces and lenses. He spent a good long while fiddling with all the bits so they lined up to his satisfaction, pointing it in all sorts of random directions including looking *directly at the sun*. But hey, if he wanted to fuck up his eyesight more than it already was, that was none of Vax's business.

Vax had decided early on that most of what Percy did was none of his business. He'd spent enough time with monsters in the Clasp to know one when he met one. There was undoubtedly reason to Percy's madness, but it was also undoubtedly *violent*. People who voluntarily dabbled with semi-controlled explosions weren't people you wanted to get too close to. The phrase 'collateral damage' came to mind. Hurt people hurt people. That was the way of the world. Experience enough horrible things and you became horrible yourself.

Of course, in Vax's experience deeply broken people tended to lean more sadistic and less… whatever incomprehensible love affair Percy had going on with his various metal dohickies. Or how he treated Vex like she was his own personal goddess come to offer him salvation (which was why Vax hadn't already stabbed him on principle for looking at Vex at all). Or how he laughed with Keyleth while they were drunk. Or how he patiently explained things (and re-re-re-explained things) to Grog. Or how he helped Pike with her camp temple even though Vax had never met a less religious person in his life. Or how he helped Scanlan fix his instruments in his spare time. Or how he'd won over Trinket, a notoriously perceptive and selective judge of character, with nothing more than a few ear scratches. Or how he kept trying to make friendly with Vax himself, despite his clear lack of trust in the man.

The more he learned about de Rolo, the less he made sense. He kept his shaving kit sharp enough to cut to the bone in a single stroke - as Vax found out to his detriment when Grog smashed his kit and Percy let him borrow his. But he couldn't wield a sword or throw a dagger to save his life. As they'd also found out through experience. Percy had an iron stomach - the food poisoning that took down the entire party didn't even give him indigestion. But he had a refined palate that left him sneering at any alcohol besides the best wine on offer. He clearly thought everyone was moments away from stabbing him in the back (which was basically true, in Vax's case, so fair enough), but he gave all his money to Vex within hours of meeting her, an act of trust he would have never expected from someone so paranoid. Percy could take an arrow to the gut with barely a wince, but getting his ear pierced for the Earring of Whisper sent him spiraling into a poorly-concealed panic attack. He point-blank refused to sing along with any of Scanlan's hiking songs, but spoke fluent Celestial, a language that basically required the speaker to have perfect pitch. He had a chivalrous streak as wide as a dragon's wingspan and as old-fashioned as powdered wigs, but was totally whipped for Vex. (As he should be.)

Enigma, thy name starts with a P and ends with Third. (The middle is as much a mystery as the person himself.)

“This is a newer model of sextant than the one I learned on, it has so many clever little features, see…” Percy pointed out this and that, not really noticing that his audience wasn’t paying a bit of attention.

Vex sidled up next to Vax, then turned her back to the railing so she could face him.

“It’s like watching a kid at Winter’s Crest,” she said softly. Percy showed absolutely no signs of being aware of her presence, judging by his unbroken monologue.

Vax laughed. “Annoying as fuck and self-absorbed?”

“Oh shush, you,” she batted his arm playfully. “You know what I mean.”

“I see you escaped being seasick,” Vax changed the topic. “Have you checked out the view from the… whatsit… raven’s nest?”

“Crow’s nest, darling, and no. I’m supposed to be a proper lady, remember?”

Right. Fucking nobility and their ridiculous standards of what people were ‘allowed’ to do.

“...and that’s how you find your position at sea using some simple calculations,” Percy concluded. He finally looked up from the thingamajig in his hands. His pale skin was starting to burn in the sunshine, but that did nothing to hide the reddening in his cheeks when he noticed Vex.

Vex smiled in the way she only ever did for Percy. You could practically *see* the little fluttering hearts where her usually razor-sharp pupils should to be. “That’s fascinating, dear. Can I try?”

Vax left. He had vomited enough already today.

One of Vax’s least favorite ways of waking up was to the sound of Percy’s pepperbox.

It was damnably loud, for one thing, and if it was anywhere in his near vicinity it ruined his sensitive half-elvish hearing for a solid minute. It was a miracle that the human could hear anything at all anymore.

For another, if Percy was shooting in the middle of the night, it was safe to assume that they were under attack. Nothing like fighting for your life to get you out of your nice warm bedroll.

Vax was halfway through buckling his knife belt when a stranger came through the door. Vex dispatched him easily - an arrow could slit a throat just as effectively as a dagger if you held it right. They could hear the screams of the other passengers on this level, as well as the panicked yells of the crew overhead. Vax was comforted to hear the steady *bang bang bang*

of Percy's pepperbox - it meant he was still up and fighting. Time to not be trapped in their tiny bunk.

Vex took the lead after glancing over her shoulder to make sure he was ready (of course he was). She carefully stepped over the corpse in the doorway and swung her bow to cover the hallway leading to the stairs. The weapon was a bit big and unwieldy in these tight corridors, but Vax had every faith that his sister wouldn't allow her limited mobility to affect her aim. Their room was at the very end of the line, furthest from the exit. No one had liked the arrangement, but that's what you got for booking at the last minute on a budget.

With his darkvision, Vax could clearly see the brigands dragging away two of the passengers at knifepoint. Vex shot at the same time Vax slung a dagger. Two bodies dropped to the ground in unison.

"Barricade yourselves in your room," Vex ordered the freed nobles, voice sharp. They then pushed forward, up the stairs, and onto the deck. The wood was slick with blood from the scattered corpses of the crew. Vax had a well-earned reputation for being graceful, but between that and the rocking from the waves, he felt like a stumbling colt.

"About time you showed up!" Percy yelled above the melee of battle. He was cornered against the railing by a tiefling, judging by the horns sticking through their hideous hat. They successfully grabbed Percy's wrist, twisting until he cried out and his pepperbox fell to the deck. Shit. Vax threw two daggers - one flew into the night (and then reappeared on his blinkback belt, gods, he loved that enchantment), but the other planted itself neatly in the side of the tiefling's neck. They *shrieked* and fell forward against Percy. His eyes went wide behind his glasses, then the weight of their tangled bodies toppled them both over the railing.

Damn it all to the lowest ring of hell.

"Can he swim?" Vex asked, something desperate in her voice.

Fuck if Vax knew. What kind of idiot gets on a boat without knowing how to swim? The same type of idiot that enjoys blowing himself up in his spare time, knowing their luck. Vax rolled his eyes. Vex would be upset if her totally-not-boyfriend died. Vax might be a little too, if he was honest with himself. And just because he didn't completely trust the bastard didn't mean he was such a bastard himself that he would let de Rolo drown. He glanced at the ominously dark waves surrounding the boat. This was going to *suck*. Entering the water was dangerously easy, as Percy had demonstrated, but Vax needed a solid exit strategy or they'd both be screwed. He looked towards a pile of rope halfway across the deck. An idea sparked.

Of course, nothing about this was going to be easy, starting with the half-ogre blocking his way. Vax would be intimidated if he didn't spar with Grog on a weekly basis. As it was, he just smirked and started ducking and weaving, scoring hits whenever the opportunity presented itself. It was all well and good until his heel slipped on the blood-wet deck and he fell flat on his back. The half-ogre took advantage of his prone position and stamped *hard* on his left wrist. Something snapped, and Vax couldn't help but cry out. Two arrows sprouted from his opponent's chest a moment later. The ogre dropped like a rock, landing elbow-first into Vax's diaphragm.

“Mind your step, brother,” Vex chastised as she helped him to his feet. Vax glanced around as he tried to catch his breath. The deck was covered in bodies, but no more active combatants.

“I just shot the last of them,” his sister confirmed. Of course she had. She was the *best*. “Percy?”

A shock of drenched white hair crested over the ship’s rail, then gracelessly flopped over it, falling onto the deck with a sad sort of splat. Darkvision wasn’t good for colors, but de Rolo looked even paler than usual. The human was breathing harder than Vax, and shaking all over to boot.

Vex snatched a mostly-blood-free cloak from one of the corpses and threw it over Percy’s shoulders. “You’re frozen through, darling!”

“It’s almost summer,” Vax said stupidly. In his defense, his wrist hurt. Quite a lot. Luckily there was at least one healing potion in his bunk. At times like this, he really missed having a healer around. Yet another reason why he should have stuck with Keyleth.

“And the ocean here is barely above freezing,” Vex retorted. “Get him out of his wet things and warm him up. The last thing we need is for him to die on us from hypothermia. I’m going to look for survivors, see if I can help any wounded worth helping.”

Vax looked at Percy. If he didn’t know better, he’d say the man was in psychic shock. But Percy was the most unflappable of them all. Sure, he’d spook like a high-strung racehorse if you poked him while he was thinking, but he’d settle into his usually grumpy self within moments. In contrast, combat situations brought out a side of Percy that was as cold and inevitable as a glacier. He took gore in his stride and didn’t really seem to notice pain. He kept going and going and *going,* guns blazing and eyes afire, until their target was dead or he was unconscious. But now? Despite the cloak, he was trembling like a wind blown leaf, eyes wide and unseeing behind the glasses miraculously still on his face. Something about being in the water had snapped the steel in Percy’s spine. It was downright unnerving.

Vax distracted himself from his unease in the usual way - levity.

“You sure you don’t want to help him strip down? Skin to skin contact is best for this sort of thing, you know.”

“Get your head out of the gutter, Vax,” his sister snapped as she walked away. “If I wanted to listen to innuendos I would have brought Scanlan.”

They *should* have brought Scanlan instead. The gnome could fake nobility well enough when the mood struck him, and he enjoyed hobnobbing with rich patrons. More germanely (drat it all, Percival-Dictionary-von-Thesaurus-Encyclopedia-the-Third-Edition was rubbing off on him), Scanlan could sing up a respectable healing spell when needed.

Also, Vex’s denial truly was impressive. Vax shook his head, then draped Percy’s arm over his shoulder and hauled him to his feet. All of de Rolo’s earlier grace on deck was gone, lost to trembling knees and weak ankles. Vax could feel seawater soaking into his shirt where they touched. It was bloody *cold* - no wonder the human was shivering so hard.

Percy didn't say a word the entire slow trip to the bunk, though the chattering of his teeth was loud right next to Vax's ear. Once there, he tried to unbutton his shirt, but his hands were trembling too hard. In the light of the safety lamp, Vax could see his fingers were slightly bluish at the tips. Fuck. A healing potion wouldn't help hypothermia, so Vax chugged it instead, wincing as his wrist clicked back together.

"Let me," he said. Percy didn't resist or complain as he was undressed. The meek compliance was honestly starting to worry Vax. As Grog had demonstrated a few months ago, Percy was particularly sensitive to showing his skin, and with damn good reason. Yet he didn't seem to care in the slightest now. "Talk to me," Vax said. Anything to break the increasingly uncomfortable silence.

Percy blinked owlishly behind his glasses. It was clear that he was surprised by Vax's words. Or maybe just his presence in general.

"C-cold," he stuttered. Vax started to roughly towel him off with Vex's sheet. There were spares down the hall she could use later, and he needed them right now. "P-please d-don't, I *beg* you, d-don't make m-me…"

Now Vax was getting scared. While Percy's stutter was uncharacteristic, it could be explained by the cold. What was concerning was that Percy didn't *beg*. Ever. Not when they'd found him in a prison cell starving to death, not when they were cornered by monsters, not when they were kidnapped by cannibals, *never.*

"Don't make you what, Freddie?"

"Go b-back. P-please."

"We might not always see eye-to-eye, but I don't hate you enough to chuck you back over the side," Vax joked. Or at least, he tried to. He nudged Percy towards the bed, then started peeling off his own clothes. Delirium plus blue fingers meant hypothermia, which meant skin-to-skin contact for slow warming. He'd tease Percy about it later, when he wasn't so shocky.

"C-can't, please, she'll… she'll…" Percy sobbed as he curled up into a tight ball on the mattress. Vax could clearly see the vivid scars crisscrossing most of his pale skin. A dark thought crossed his mind, and he intuitively knew he was right. *Flashback.* Double shit. Could this day get *any* worse? Not that he was asking, if any god saw that thought as a challenge.

"You're safe here, Percy," Vax said soothingly. This really should be Vex's job, but she was the better healer between the two of them, and they needed some sailors alive or they were going to be in a worse mess than they already were. "I'm just going to lay down here and warm you up, alright? Be a good chap and try not to punch me."

Vax piled on blankets and even their spare cloaks on top of them both, then settled into the bed so that they were face-to-face. Luckily, Percy didn't react negatively. His skin was clammy and cold as fuck against Vax's chest, but he didn't jerk away.

“You owe me a drink for this,” he muttered into Percy’s hair. It was still damp and smelled like salty fish piss. “Make that two drinks. Let’s get your hands in my armpits - they’ll warm faster that way. I assume you want to blow them off in your own time, and not have them fall off from frostbite prematurely?”

Percy made no indication that he’d heard him at all, so Vax coaxed Percy’s hands from where he’d clenched them protectively around the back of his neck and tucked them into his own armpits. *Gods.* They were so cold they fucking *burned.*

“Three drinks,” Vax hissed between clenched teeth. “The good shit too, not the swill Grog likes.”

Percy didn’t say a word but pressed his forehead tight against Vax’s collarbone. It was a uniquely vulnerable position, and Vax didn’t know quite what to make of it. Percy was always so self-sufficent, so proud, so unshakable. If Vax had to name someone able to walk into hell and make some demons cower with nothing more than their attitude, Percy would be the second name on his list, right after Vex.

Percy’s shaking slowly changed in quality - no longer shivers, but sobs.

“Hey, it’s alright, you’re safe.” Vax rubbed his back awkwardly, exquisitely aware of the rough scars underneath his fingertips. He’d known about them for a while now, but everything about this situation was making them viscerally real in a way mere knowledge couldn’t. Someone, at some point, had tortured his friend (yeah, ‘friend’, because fuck it, they were all but naked together in bed, they were certainly more than ‘colleagues’ at this point), had stuck knives and brands who knows what else into Percy’s skin just to hear him scream, and Vax didn’t even know their name so he could hunt them down and stab them in their fucking face. Gods, the kid had been young even by human standards when Scanlan broke him out of prison, and the marks on his back had been years old then.

“Hurts,” Percy whimpered. Shit. Vax knew from experience that warming up after extreme cold exposure could be fucking agony. Especially in sensitive extremities like hands. Like Percy needed any more triggers to send him off the deep end, pun not intended.

“Stop. Please. I don’t know. I *swear* I don’t know!”

It was painful to listen to the proud man plead: Vax knew that Percy would be mortally embarrassed if he was in his right mind. His perfect composure, regardless of circumstance, would have made Vax’s elvish comportment tutors weep. But when the layers of clothing and conscious masking were stripped away, it seemed that all that was left were scars.

“It’ll be over soon,” Vax whispered while wishing he had anything better to offer. Percy’s fingers dug into his sides spasmodically in time with his hitching breaths and muttered pleading.

The door swung open, revealing his sister.

“How’s he doing?” She dropped Percy’s pepperbox into one of the side table drawers. Hopefully, it wasn’t still loaded. Judging by their luck so far tonight, Vax wouldn’t count on

it.

“Not good,” he said truthfully. “I think he thinks he’s being tortured again. Something about the cold must have set him off. He’s not fighting me, thank gods, but he’s pretty miserable.”

Vex came over so she could run her fingers through Percy’s white hair. It was mostly dry, now, but still smelled like fish piss.

“Oh darling,” she whispered. There wasn’t anything she could do to help either, so after a minute she turned back to Vax. “That’s not the only bad news. The crew is dead.”

“Please tell me you were paying attention to Freddie’s lectures yesterday.”

“Not enough to get us out of this mess. The other passengers are worse than useless. We need Percy.”

“Fuck.”

“About the only good news is that I think the pirates must have come via portal - there isn’t a second ship nearby - which means we’re probably fairly close to shore. We should be able to figure something out in the morning. I’m going back up to clean up some of the mess and maybe get the anchor down. If we aren’t moving, we aren’t wrecking and we aren’t drifting further off course.”

It was as good a plan as any. She was already gone by the time Vax realized he should have suggested they trade places.

Something about Vex’s visit made Percy stop muttering, thankfully. The weeping stopped about the same time he got color back into his fingertips. Once it was clear Percy was probably going to live with all extremities intact, Vax stopped brooding and let himself try to sleep. It wasn’t the most comfortable of spots - the bunk was skinny for one person, much less two - but when he tried to shift away, Percy clung to him with a semi-conscious desperation that Vax had no desire to fight. They could deal with the awkwardness in the morning once everyone was awake enough to be properly mortified.

“Vax?”

He started awake, almost head-butting Percy in the process.

“Whuddafuq?”

“If I understand your slurring properly, I believe I may concur with your sentiment.”

Oh yeah. Percy was back and firing on *all* cylinders. Lucky him. This conversation was going to be weird enough without skin contact, so Vax slipped out of the bed with as much grace as he could scrape together. It wasn’t much considering how stiff his muscles had gotten overnight from sleeping cramped on a hard bunk. Vax leaned back, and every vertebra in his back seemed to pop. Ugh.

“The last thing I remember, since you’re clearly too groggy to ask, is discussing the finer points of stellar cartography with the captain when a light-blue portal opened up over the forecastle. It was dark, so it was hard to see how many came through. They immediately started attacking the crew on deck. I pulled my weapon…” his hand went to his side, then under his pillow. “Where is it?”

“Pepperbox?” Vax needed coffee. Lots of coffee. Hot. Gods knew where he’d find such a thing on a boat with an anathema to fire.

“Yes, obviously!” Percy snapped with unusual ire. Then his face went white. “It fell overboard, didn’t it? Oh gods. It’s gone, and *shit,* it’s *gone*, I can’t…”

“Woah there Freddie!” Vax stopped him before his muttering developed into a full-blown panic attack. He’d had enough of Percy’s mental breakdowns over the last twelve hours already. “You dropped it on deck before you took an impromptu swim. Vex put it in one of the drawers.”

Percy was out of bed before Vax finished speaking. The instant he had his weapon in his hand, something in his shoulders released, and his exhale shuddered at the end. Vax knew the man was unusually attached to his weapon - many adventurers were. But this was something… different. Darker. More like an addict that had waited a bit too long for his next fix.

“Remind me to thank her when I see her next,” Percy said, relief clear in his tone. He sat down on the bunk, then started methodically checking his weapon for damage. It was a familiar ritual. When he spoke again, all signs of his earlier temper-slash-panic were gone. “You say I went overboard?”

“Yeah. You fished yourself out eventually, but you were hypothermic.”

“Hence the sleeping arrangements,” Percy concluded. He placed his gun within easy reach, then rooted around in his pack for his spare clothes.

“Correct.”

“Then I believe thanks are in order.”

“What’s being ordered is five *good* drinks for me on your tab,” Vax countered. “You’re about as fun to cuddle as a frozen fish.”

“Deal.”

They got dressed in silence. Vax considered leaving it there, but his shoulder was still crusty with salt that was mostly from tears and not seawater. He had questions. He chewed on them for a moment, trying to decide which one was the most important. Percy would likely only answer a single question, if that.

“Who is Julius?” he said right as Percy reached for the door handle. The human froze as if charmed. Vax cursed himself for timing - with Percy’s back turned he was impossible to read,

and the room was too narrow to slip around him with any sort of subtlety. “You were really…” he struggled to think of the least emotionally charged word that was still accurate. *Hallucinating, traumatized, gibbering,* and *frantic* hardly seemed kind. “…out of it.”

“What did you hear?” Percy asked, something odd in his voice.

Vax shrugged. “Nothing really coherent. Figured most of it had something to do with whoever decorated your skin so thoroughly.”

“Ah.” Percy leaned closer to the door as if he wished for nothing more than it to open up and swallow him whole.

“I’m not asking about what happened,” Vax reassured him. “Some things are better left in the past. Hells know I get that. Just… after last night, I find myself with the pressing need to stab someone in retribution for what they put you through, and I’d like a bit more than a name to point me in the right direction.”

Percy froze, then started laughing. It was a horrible, broken sound, and Vax rushed to lay a hand on his shoulder, his usual boundaries be damned.

“You sound just like him, you know?”

What.

“When I had nightmares, I would always go to Julius. My father was too… intimidating, I suppose. But I always felt safe at Julius’s side. You know how protective older siblings are. Perhaps when I wasn’t myself… you reminded me of him.”

Shit.

“What they did to me was *nothing* compared to what they did to my brother.” Percy pulled away from Vax’s hand, then vanished through the door before he could stop him.

Fuck.

Vax hurried to follow. By the time he caught up, Percy was deep in discussion with Vex about their situation.

“Vax, I need you to pick the lock in the captain’s quarters,” he ordered as if their previous conversation had never happened. Vex caught his eye and shook her head. Now was not the time for continuing his interrogation. So he went.

The lock wasn’t difficult, but damnably fiddly. Once open, Percy made a beeline towards the maps covering the table. He stared at it for a long moment, then went back to the deck. The thingamajig from yesterday was back in his hands. A few minutes of sun-staring, and he went back to the office.

“I know where we are,” he announced. “And I know how to get to where we need to be. Vex, I need you up in the rigging. I’d recommend bare feet - it’s a lot more slippery up there than

in a tree, so be careful. Falling on water from that height is like falling on solid stone. Vax, you're with me."

Over the next few hours, Vax grew *intimately* acquainted with ropes and sails. It wasn't a pleasant experience. Percy had a name for every single one of them, and sometimes the same piece had different names for different segments. It was confusing as hell, but Percy was in one of his *moods* so Vax kept his head down (lest it be bitten off) and tried to keep track of everything as best he could. It irked him to be bossed around, but he was practical enough to know that without Percy, he wouldn't see dry land again.

Eventually, the other nobles stuck their heads out from their bunks and did what nobles did best: complain.

Ho-ly *shit* did Percy *not* have time for that.

He opened his arms wide. "Look around you. Where are we?"

The crowd clamored over themselves to answer first.

"On a boat."

"In the middle of nowhere."

"Lost!"

"It doesn't matter where, I'm telling you I'm the Count of Esseks and if you don't do as I say then…."

"We are on the good ship *Revelation*," Percival snapped. "And she is not at port, which means we are subject to maritime law, not common law. Is anyone here proficient? No? Then I shall enlighten you. Since I am the only qualified person capable of operating this ship, by necessity and default that makes me captain. For your purposes, that means I'm a god. I don't care who you are or who you know on land. You are currently on *my* ship and you *will* obey. Until you disembark, my word is law, and any court you care to sue me in is going to tell you to be grateful you're alive and then laugh you right out the door.

"Now. I have given you an order. In case you forgot, I shall remind you. You will quietly and quickly go to your quarters and you will remain there until summoned. If you do not, I am fully within my rights to whip you bloody and throw you overboard to the sharks. Which, I'll have you know, I possess the means and desire to do. Have I made myself understood?" He paused for a long moment. No one dared meet his eye (except Vex, of course, and judging by the rising blush in her cheeks that particular tone of voice was turning her on in ways Vax had absolutely no interest in knowing anything about). "Good. Dismissed."

The nobles scuttled down to their rooms with only the smallest bit of muttering. Once the door closed behind them, Percy let out a gusty sigh.

"*Gods* I hope I was never that vexatious," he rubbed his hair back from his eyes. "The utter *gall* to complain when you are *that* level of incompetent!"

“Where’d that speech come from, Freddie? Not exactly your style.”

“Ah,” he looked slightly abashed. “My captain gave me a similar speech not long after I came aboard. I was making a right nuisance of myself.”

“Really. You, a nuisance. I can’t imagine,” Vax widened his eyes and tried his best to pass his sarcasm off as sincerity. It didn’t work, judging by Percy’s eyeroll and Vex’s elbow in his ribs.

“The harbor is fast approaching, and I need you at the bow,” Percy pointed for good measure. “And then we need to figure out how we’re going to use this mess to our advantage.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out, darling,” Vex said as she swarmed up what Vax now knew was called the mast. “You always do.”

Damn him, de Rolo *did*.

They reunited with the rest of their party a few days later. Vex was, to her utter glee, several thousand gold richer - far more than what had been promised for the original job. Vax was just happy to have some proper shadows around his shoulders, solid ground under his feet, and a *good* drink (paid for by Percy) in his hand. The kind that came in an individual bottle marked with fancy calligraphy. It tasted like summer and was *almost* enough to make Vax forget the smell of salty fish piss.

The underbelly team had *not* gone to the fighting ring, which was great. He’d be able to take Keyleth to her first after all. Vax watched with a bit of a smile as she smeared herbal paste all over Percy’s lobster-red sunburn. She was concentrating on not getting it into his eyes, which meant that just a little bit of tongue was peeping out of the corner of her mouth. It was adorable and he loved it.

(He loved her.)

Percy, in turn, was smiling. It was soft, barely there, but honest in a way his bitter smirks often weren’t. His knees were pressed up against Keyleth’s so he could be close enough for her ministrations. He’d been noticeably more tactile with everyone in the party since being on that boat. But not with Vex. He never initiated anything with her, which was proof of how clever he was. Whatever they had going, it was on *her* terms, and would continue to be so. As it should be. Vax might not like the particular nature of their relationship, but it made Vex happy, and he would do *anything* to keep her safe and happy. So as long as Percy kept treating her like she was *everything* (because she was), Vax would let him. The instant that changed, well. People became monsters to protect those they loved.

Vax knew that Percy understood that mindset, *lived* that. He had seen behind his facade of pomp and pageantry, and he knew that behind all the viciousness was just a scared little boy grieving the protection of his older brother. Knowing that made Percy a bit more predictable, a bit more safe, a bit more relatable. Made him trustworthy, even.

“Another?” Vax raised his empty bottle.

“Thank you again,” Percy said as he slid a replacement across the table. It was cold too - an extravagance that Vax didn’t think this tavern would offer. Ice was expensive, and cooling charms weren’t cheap.

“Of course, Freddie. Anytime.”

End Notes

Look me in the eye and tell me that Percy wouldn't react badly to being dunked in cold water. Also, that little nerd probably knew how to run a sextant before he ever set foot on a boat.

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